

## **An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, by David Hume**

Descartes was a rationalist, Hume is an empiricist  
his knowledge comes from experience, not reason

Descartes believed the mind is full of structures/ideas before interacting with the world  
Hume believes there are some structures, but the rest is black, waiting for interaction

### **Section One**

written as a reaction to Descartes *Meditations*

concerned about moral philosophy: the science of human nature  
can approach this in two ways:

- 1) humans as active creatures (easy) - vice vs. virtue
- 2) humans as reasonable creatures (abstruse) - metaphysics

"easy and obvious" philosophy considers man as born for action  
pursuing one object, and avoid another according to the value which these objects possess  
the make us feel the difference between virtue and vice; excite the sentiments

"accurate and abstruse" considers man a reasonable rather than active creature  
these philosophers endeavor to form his understanding more than cultivate his manners  
human nature subject to speculation, want to find principles which regulate "easy and obvious"  
principles which regulate our understanding, excite our sentiments, make us approve or blame  
objects, action, or behavior

if we want to understand the "easy and obvious," must investigate "accurate and abstruse"

warns against Cartesian philosophy  
must recognize first that you are a human being

On the contrary, the abstruse philosophy, being founded on a turn of mind, which cannot enter into business and action, vanishes when the philosopher leaves the shade and comes into open day; nor can its principles easily retain any influence over our conduct and behavior. The feelings of our heart, the agitation of our passions, the vehemence of our affections, dissipate all its conclusions, and reduce the profound philosopher to a mere plebeian.

*humans are:*

*reasonable - thus aspire to scientific knowledge, but this knowledge is limited*

*sociable - but a purely social life can be tiresome*

*active - a life of action and business can wear us out*

to do true metaphysics, must understand how the mind operates  
find out what the limits of understanding are, and throw out anything beyond it  
Hume is a philosophical Newton; wants laws of motion in human understanding  
if we can explain the nature and principles of human understanding, as Newton has done for the principles that govern planetary orbits, we can reject bad reasoning and proceed more carefully

### **Section Two**

perceptions of the mind can be either impressions or ideas

impressions are lively and vivid; ideas, drawn from memory/imagination, are less lively and vivid  
 ideas are the result of impressions (Descartes thought the opposite)

impressions comprehend "all our more lively perceptions"

e.g. the color red and the feeling of anger are both impressions

ideas are what arise when we reflect upon impressions

e.g. the memory of seeing red or feeling anger are ideas

our imaginations are merely a complex of ideas, the imagination is not unlimited

if we imagine a gold mountain, we are compounding the idea of gold with idea of mountain

complex ideas are compounded out of simple ideas, which are derived from simple impressions

imagination is limited to those idea of which we had impressions

e.g. blind men cannot imagine color, deaf cannot imagine sounds

God being infinite and perfect comes from the idea of more and good multiplied

there is no idea of the infinite because one cannot trace it back to impressions

in this sense, Hume disagrees with the Cartesian view of God

(Hume slams the Catholic Church, wrote a book undermining medieval belief/proof of God)

since impressions are vivid and clearly defined, not likely to fall in error with them

if you don't understand the meaning of an idea, should look at original impression

if there is no original impression, the idea is vacuous and should be abandoned

since all ideas are come from impressions, terms not connected with any impression is vacuous

When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion, that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived?* And if it be possible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion. By bringing ideas into so clear a light, we may reasonably hope to remove all dispute, which may arise, concerning their nature and reality.

however, Hume has one objection to this general rule

can imagine certain shades of blue without having ever perceived them

able to imagine some other shade that falls between even though the impression is missing

has no answer for this, but it is so singular that it doesn't upset his general maxim

### Section Three

discusses the connection that exists between ideas; all are linked to one another

ideas get linked together, but impressions just happen

three principles by which ideas may be associated:

1) resemblance - a picture of a tree makes us think of trees

2) contiguity - mention of one apartment might lead us to discuss others

3) cause/effect - thought of a wound makes us think of pain that follows

### Section Four

draws distinction between "relations of ideas" and "matters of fact"

relations of ideas do not depend on experience, but are a priori and depend on reason

denial of these implies contradiction

e.g. math, logic, triangle equals two right angles, etc.

matters of fact deal with experience; can't be disproved with appeal to logic

can be denied without fear of contradiction, it either is or is not the case  
 e.g. the sun is shining, yesterday I went for a walk

The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible; because it can never imply a contradiction, and is conceived by the mind with the same facility and distinctness, as if ever so conformable to reality. *That the sun will not rise to-morrow* is no less intelligible a proposition, and implies no more contradiction, than the affirmation, *that it will rise*.

comes down to: what can we know about the world?  
 if we know something scientifically, we can predict it  
 if we are stuck in the present, we cannot know anything

neither experience nor memory are the source of knowledge that the sun will rise tomorrow  
 we know matters of fact about unobserved things through cause and effect  
 knowledge the sun will rise is from past experience, because the sun has risen every day

how do we know the principle of cause and effect? reason or experience?  
 if I see a ball rolling toward another, how do I know it will move when struck?  
 this knowledge is not reason, since I can deny the ball will move without contradiction  
 thus knowledge must be based on experience, from past events we infer future events  
 (Descartes said the opposite, e.g. wax story)

In a word, then, every effect is distinct even from its cause. It could not, therefore, be discovered in the cause, and the first invention or conception of it, *a priori*, must be entirely arbitrary. And even after it is suggested, the conjunction of it with the cause must appear equally arbitrary; since there are always many other effects, which, to reason, must seem fully as consistent and natural. In vain, therefore, should we pretend to determine any single event, or infer any cause or effect, without the assistance of observation and experience.

we base our knowledge of the future on past events  
 but how do we know the past is a good guide for future predictions?

But notwithstanding this ignorance of natural powers and principles, we always presume, when we see like sensible qualities, that they have like secret powers, and expect, that effects, similar to those which we have experienced, will follow from them. If a body of like color and consistence with that bread, which we have formerly eat, be presented to us, we make no scruple of repeating the experiment, and foresee, with certainty, like nourishment and support. Now this is a process of the mind of thought, of which I would willingly know the foundation.

in order to know what is going on in the world, all we have to go on is impressions  
 in the past, bread has helped me survive, so I assume it will do the same every time  
 but how do we make that mental leap? what is truly causality?  
 to make the connection, we must get beyond impressions

when we examine experience to see how expectations are produced, discover they arise after we have experienced "the constant conjunction of two objects"; only then do we "expect the one from the appearance of the other."

If there be any suspicion, that the course of nature may change, and that the past may be no rule for the future, all experience becomes useless, and can give rise to no inference or

conclusion. It is impossible, therefore, that any arguments from experience can prove this resemblance of the past to the future; since all these arguments are founded on the supposition of that resemblance.

perhaps what seems to connect things doesn't really connect them  
 appearance might not match with reality; this is a problem with metaphysics  
 skeptical solution: suspend our judgement from doubtful things  
 always refer back to common ideal or experience (or for Descartes, reason)

causality is a custom, a habit of the mind from repeated experience  
 thus the mind develops a habit of cause and effect  
 this generates *belief* that the future will resemble the past  
 we infer similarities between past and future  
 but there is no form of reasoning that can confirm these inferences

This principle is custom or habit. For whatever the repetition of any particular act of operation produces a propensity to renew the same act or operation, without being impelled by any reasoning or process of the understanding; we always say, that this propensity is the effect of custom.

habit and custom overpower reason  
 cannot choose belief, it is a movement of the mind

All belief of matter of fact or real existence is derived merely from some object, present to the memory or senses, and a customary conjunction between that and some other object. Or in other words; having found, in many instances, that any two kinds of objects, flame and heat, snow and cold, have always been conjoined together; if flame or snow be presented anew to the senses, the mind is carried by custom to expect heat or cold, and to *believe* that such a quality does exist, and will discover itself upon a nearer approach.

### Section Five

there is no reason why we should reason according to cause and effect, yet we always do  
 our inductive reasoning regarding experience is derived from custom, not from understanding  
 that's why we must see a process recur many times before we can see two events as connected

Hume is looking for causality: if we know causality, we can predict the future with confidence  
 couldn't speculate if custom hadn't given us the ability to see actions as having consequences  
 however, all reasoning from experience falls back on impressions

we make inferences by means of the imagination  
 however, Hume draws a line between fiction and belief  
 the difference is a sentiment from the mind that cannot be willed  
 fiction is the product of pure imagination, and can be willed by the mind  
 strange images are derived from simple impressions  
 belief is a combination of imagination and a certain sentiment we cannot control that suggests to us our imaginings correspond with reality

It follows, therefore, that the difference between *fiction* and *belief* lies in some sentiment or feeling, which is annexed to the latter, not to the former, and which depends not on the will, nor can be command at pleasure. It must be excited by nature, like all other

sentiments; and must arise from the particular situation, in which the mind is placed at any particular juncture.

when memory/impression are present in our mind, force of custom will carry the imagination to think of something to which that impression is constantly conjoined; this force of custom forms our beliefs, creates more vivid and forceful versions of pure imaginings

cause and effect allow the mind to move from one thought to another  
 when these laws of association are led by custom, they form strong instinctive beliefs  
 causation is formed by instinct, not reason  
 it is important we see the world causality, since it is the source of all action and speculation

### **Section Six**

there is no such thing as chance  
 however, our ignorance of the real causes of events leads to belief of chance  
 belief is based on chance; the more you experience a cause and effect, the more you believe it

however, probability doesn't give us knowledge of the world  
 cause does not necessarily mean effect will come  
 (you could roll a six every time you roll a die)

### **Section Seven**

fundamental ideas to understand the world are force, power, energy, and necessary connection  
 since ideas and complex impressions are formed by simple impressions, complex ideas like causation have no meaning unless we can trace it to its simple impression

there is no simple impression that could inform us of necessary connection  
 examines impressions of interactions between bodies, body/mind, and within the body  
 argues in each we do not perceive any secret power of necessary connection

already examined body-body in interaction of billiards balls  
 all we observe is that the motion of the first ball is followed by the motion of the second ball  
 cannot observe the act of causation; the mind doesn't perceive the workings of cause and effect  
 otherwise we could determine what effects follow from causes without relying on observation

looks at mind-body interaction according to which an act of volition can move the limbs  
 while we are aware of our ability to move our body, we are by no means aware of the connection between the act of volition and bodily movement  
 connection between mind and body is poorly understood at best, nor do we understand why we are so capable of moving our fingers by not controlling our heart  
 there is a long chain of muscle and nerve interaction between volition and movement  
 our mind wills the arm to move, but actually produces a series of effects it in no way wills

mind-mind interaction is where we focus the mind or produce ideas  
 however, we fail to locate necessary connection  
 we are unaware of how the mind can conjure an idea out of nothing  
 experience teaches us that the mind has varying degrees of control, so that it has more power over reason than the passions, or greater self-command when healthy

that we learn from experience suggests we are observing only a constant conjunction and not some necessary connection

So that, upon the whole, there appears not, throughout all nature, any one instance of connexion, which is conceivable by us. All events seem entirely loose and separate. One event follows another; but we never can observe any tie between them. They seem *conjoined*, but never *connected*. And as we can have no idea of any thing, which never appeared to our outward sense or inward sentiment, the necessary conclusion *seems* to be, that we have no idea of connexion or power at all, and that these words are absolutely without any meaning, when employed either in philosophical reasoning, or common life.

it appears that we are incapable of apprehending any necessary connection between events  
all we can intelligibly say is that one even follows another  
events may appear conjoined, but never connected  
since there is no simple impression related to necessary connection, the term seems vacuous

but do we have an impression of necessary connection? YES!  
if one event has invariably, in our experience, followed another, we become confident in predicting upon appearance of the first event that the second will follow, and we come to call the first event the cause and the second the effect

we feel these two events to be connected in the imagination  
when we say two events are connected, we mean they acquired connection in our mind  
that sentiment/feeling is generated in the mind; but it is a real impression  
we made it up; it's not out there to be found  
it is impossible to find connection in the world  
this is a limit of the human understanding

cause and effect is crucial to science, should know it if we want to know anything  
yet we have no experience of any kind of secret power or necessary connection in nature  
all we can claim is some objects or events are constantly conjoined

thus Hume provides two definitions of cause:  
the first is: "an object, followed by another, and where all the objects, similar to the first, are followed by objects similar to the second"  
the second is: "where, if the first object had not been, the second never had existed"  
drawing on connection created by imagination between cause and effect, he gives a third definition: "an object, followed by another, and whose appearance always conveys the thought to that other"

humans have no idea of necessary connection in the world  
it is really just movements of the mind

### **Section Eight**

there are two kinds of science:  
    natural - matter, physical stuff (54)  
    human - human nature (55)

natural science: it is impossible for people to experience the world in any other way

we are apt to believe that there are laws in nature that determine the necessary forces, causes, and effects that determine the movement of all bodies, and without exception  
however, this idea of necessary connection results from constant conjunction in our minds

human science: regularity of human behavior in all sorts of circumstances  
throughout history and across cultures, human behavior remains constant  
similar motives produce similar actions just as similar causes produce similar events  
however, similar matter, the necessary connection in human behavior is in the imagination

Natural: cause -----> effect  
Human: motive -----> action  
                  voluntary

when we see physical phenomena that run counter to expectations, we do not suppose that the laws of nature have been suspended; we simply assume some unobserved and contrary force must have been acting on the object, thus upsetting predictions

Hume similarly explains unexpected behavior of people: rather than think they act at random, he believes there is some hidden motive or unknown personality trait that makes them act contrary to expectations

Hume is basically a determinist  
necessity in nature -- must do things; required  
human nature is just as deterministic

voluntary implies free will  
free will is a vacuous idea  
it means I can do whatever I want  
it means I can choose against my motives

all actions of men have some sort of connection with motives and circumstances  
thus they follow with some degree of uniformity  
we do not have free will, but we have liberty instead  
no free choice of will, that is determined by motives  
liberty is to act on the determination of the will

For what is meant by liberty, when applied to voluntary actions? We cannot surely mean, that actions have so little connexion with motives, inclinations, and circumstances, that one does not follow with a certain degree of uniformity from the other, and that one affords no inference by which we can conclude the existence of the other. For these are plain and acknowledged matters of fact. By liberty, then, we can only mean *a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will*; that is, if we choose to remain at rest, we may; if we choose to move, we also may. Now this hypothetical liberty is universally allowed to belong to every one, who is not a prisoner and in chains.

prison example (page 60)  
prisoner is being restrained from using liberty  
motive tells him to escape, but the guards and bars do not let him  
the guards have a motive to keep him from escaping